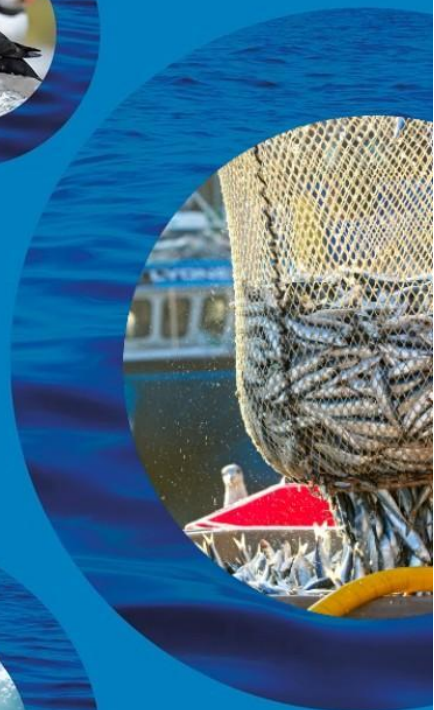




Marine  
Management  
Organisation

# Seagrass and seahorse diving guidance note



...ambitious for our seas and coasts



Both species of seahorse native to the UK: spiny seahorse (*Hippocampus guttulatus*) and short snouted seahorse (*Hippocampus hippocampus*) are protected under Section 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 ([Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981](#)). Both are commonly observed in seagrass beds.

**It is an offence to:**

- **intentionally kill, injure or take a seahorse;**
- **intentionally or recklessly damage, destroy, or obstruct access to, any structure or place which a seahorse uses for shelter or protection;**
- **intentionally or recklessly disturb a seahorse while it is occupying a structure or place which it uses for shelter or protection.**

## **Advice on diving or snorkelling on seagrass beds**

You must have a wildlife licence if you are diving or snorkelling and intending to do something likely to disturb seahorses. This could be taking photographs or filming. Intentionally disturbing seahorses without a wildlife licence could lead to enforcement action.

MMO may issue a [wildlife licence](#) for specific reasons, this may include activities which are completed for scientific or educational purposes.

If you incidentally encounter a seahorse whilst swimming or diving, to reduce any potential disturbance:

- Do not spend more than five minutes observing a seahorse;
- Never move or touch a seahorse, it is common to find seahorses lying motionless on the seafloor;
- Do not crowd a seahorse with multiple persons surrounding it;
- Do not pursue a seahorse if they swim away;
- If a seahorse displays signs of stress, you must retreat slowly to at least 5 metres away, avoiding sudden movement;
- Ensure your equipment (such as hoses and gauges) is tucked away and your arms and legs do not dangle down onto or drag across the seabed.



The following list describes typical behaviour displayed by stressed seahorses:

- A seahorse may swim away or make erratic movements;
- A seahorse may rise up into the water column above the seabed or into surrounding area and swim with its tail curled up;
- A seahorse may hold its head in a downward, chest hugging posture;
- A seahorse may turn its back, curl up, lie flat or move away;
- A seahorse's colouring may darken, especially in the squares amongst the body ridges.

## Images and videos of seahorses

MMO advise that images of seahorses shared publicly should model best practice guidelines as set out above. Photographs and videos of seahorses exhibiting signs of stress or suggesting that an offence has occurred may be investigated and could lead to enforcement action.

## Reporting seahorse sightings

Records of seahorse distribution are vital for their conservation. Any sightings of seahorses whether in the sea, or stranded, should be shared with Natural England by emailing the Seahorse Team, at: [seahorses@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:seahorses@naturalengland.org.uk).

Please include when and where the seahorse sighting occurred, and, where possible (without disturbance occurring), a photograph. If possible, location on a map, GPS coordinates, a grid reference or What3words to give more precise location are particularly helpful.

You can also report your sightings to [The Seahorse Trust](#) to help with their research.